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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: RADICAL SHI'A CLERIC SUPPORTS IRAN, WARNS OF
CLASHES (C-CT7-00989)

REF: A. 08 RIYADH 371
[1](#)B. 06 RIYADH 3720
[1](#)C. 08 RIYADH 1170

Classified By: CG JOHN KINCANNON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Sheikh Nimr Baqr al-Nimr, a Shi'a sheikh in Qatif, Saudi Arabia has once again caused controversy with his radical statements supporting Iran and challenging Saudi authority. In a July 11, 2008 sermon al-Nimr defended Iran's right to respond to "American aggression" and stated that "people of faith stand with Iran heart and soul." Al-Nimr also called on Iran to give assurances that it will safeguard "our vital interests." In a July 22 interview with IslamOnline, al-Nimr further stated that he had resubmitted a petition to the SAG calling for the government to take various steps to empower and recognize Saudi Arabia's Shi'a population. Al-Nimr ominously warned that clashes might ensue between Saudi Shi'a and the authorities if these demands are not met. The always controversial sheikh last made waves during Ashura celebrations in January 2008, when he called for the formation of a "Righteous Opposition Front" that would fight those who prevent Shi'a from practicing their faith. Though post contacts report al-Nimr's latest public statements represent the thinking of only a small minority of Shi'a, there is concern that his words undermine King Abdullah's efforts to promote tolerant dialogue and give ammunition to the many Saudis already suspicious Shi'ism. END SUMMARY.

"STAND WITH IRAN"

[1](#)2. (S/NF) On July 11, controversial Shi'a sheikh Nimr Baqr al-Nimr of the Awamiyya neighborhood of Qatif delivered a sermon over two-hours in length in which he defended Iran's right to develop nuclear capabilities, complimented the Iranian people and government on their piety, and asked Iran to give assurances that it will safeguard the vital interests of people in neighboring nations. Sheikh al-Nimr also made various anti-American references, claiming that America "wants to humiliate the world." In the case of America striking Iran, al-Nimr stated that "Iran has the right to close the Straits of Hormuz, to destroy the Zionist enemy, and to strike at American bases and American interests anywhere." While claiming to be wholeheartedly with Iran, al-Nimr did add that "we do not accept Iran's actions if it attacks our vital interests or when it becomes a suspect in a similar escalation and thus gives America an excuse and aids the hypocrites." In an attempt to move his support of Iran away from a purely political context, al-Nimr added that "our defense is not of Iran the state, but of divine values, it is

a defense of the right."

CLASHES AND THE RIGHT TO UTILIZE FOREIGN POWERS

13. (S/NF) The sheikh continued the tough talk in a July 22 interview with website IslamOnline.net. In the interview Al-Nimr said in that he had resubmitted a petition - he claims that he previously submitted the petition to Eastern Province Deputy Emir Prince Jiluwi in January 2008 - to the SAG calling for permission to form a council of Shi'a ulema that will be called the Council of Ahl al-Bayt Scholars (Majlis Fugaha Ahl al-Bayt). Al-Nimr stated that this council should be comprised of high-ranking religious leaders, so that the Shari'ah needs of the local community can be resolved without foreign interference. Additionally, the sheikh asked for constitutional recognition of the Shi'a creed, and for abolition of all laws and regulations against Shi'a. The sheikh specifically cited issues such as permission to build hawzas, hussaiynias, religious colleges, centers and institutions; creation of a unified religious curriculum, or permitting a Shi'a curriculum in predominantly Shi'a areas; independence of the Jaafari court and a widening of the court's powers; and, resolution of what the Sheikh termed "actual discrimination," for example, the lack of Shi'a in the Council of Ministers, diplomatic corps, Shura Council and other governing institutions.

14. (S/NF) The requests included in al-Nimr's July 22 interview were not particularly exceptional and closely resemble oft-heard community concerns. In late June, Shi'a

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leader Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar - the only Saudi Shi'a to participate in the Madrid Conference for Interfaith Dialogue - made a similar call for the establishment of an institution for Shi'a religious authority in Saudi Arabia, so as to prevent an influx of views from "outside the homeland." The controversial aspect of al-Nimr's July 22 statements were his warning that if the requests are not met, clashes will ensue.

He added that in such an event, the Saudi Shi'a have the right to utilize any foreign power for protection, including Iran. Alluding to Desert Shield/Storm, al-Nimr noted that Iranian assistance to the Saudi Shi'a would be no different than the actions of other regional governments or sects who have sought the help of foreign governments to protect them from other countries.

15. (S/NF) Local Shi'a websites reported that on July 26, al-Nimr sent a letter to IslamOnline.net claiming that his words had been manipulated and taken out of context in the July 22 interview. He denied having said that it is the right of Saudi Shi'a to benefit from outside force, including Iran. He also said that he does not believe "piety abroad" is Iran or America, but rather that piety is God alone.

AL-NIMR'S INFLUENCE AND THE IMPACT OF HIS WORDS

16. (S/NF) Sheikh al-Nimr's July rhetoric follows up on his January 2008 Ashura sermon calling for creation of a "Righteous Opposition Front" that will "fight and condemn those who prevent us from practicing our faith." Per post contacts, the Sheikh's calls did not result in any such front being created, but did earn him a visit from the Eastern Province Mabahith (Reftel A).

17. (S/NF) Most in the Qatif community believe that despite the press coverage of his words, al-Nimr continues to be second-tier leader within the Saudi Shi'a community. Jafar al-Shayeb, one of the leading political figures among the Saudi Shi'a, told PolOff that as al-Nimr is not part of a larger social or political grouping (such as the Islahiyyah movement - often referred to in the past as "Shirazis" - or

Saudi Hizbollah), al-Nimr's influence is limited. (NOTE: Al-Nimr follows Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrasi, one of the founders of the Islamic Action Organization in Iraq, as his marja. Al-Mudarrasi does not espouse the ideology of wilayet al-faqih, in which a country is led by a single religious leader, but rather believes in shura al-fuqaha, in which a council of religious leaders should lead the state. Shura al-Fuqaha is an idea previously advocated by the late Ayatollah Mohammed al-Husseini al-Shirazi. END NOTE). Hussein al-Alaq, one of the managers of Shi'a political website rasid.com, also told PolOff that al-Nimr commands only a minor following within Qatif. Relating a personal anecdote, al-Alaq said that he had recently attended a Friday sermon at al-Nimr's Imam al Hussain Mosque and was surprised to find the Sheikh speaking to an audience of only some 50 to 75 people. Nabih al-Ibrahim, Vice President of the Qatif Municipal Council and a childhood friend and current Awamiyya neighbor of al-Nimr, believed that the sheikh's range of influence is limited to Awamiyya. Al-Ibrahim believes that of the village's approximately 25,000 residents (his estimate) some 500 are ardent supporters of al-Nimr who would take action if commanded by the Sheikh.

COMMENT

18. (S/NF) All contacts spoken to by PolOff believe Sheikh Nimr's comments are unhelpful to the goals of greater rights for the Shi'a community. They believe that Sunni conservatives will use the comments of Sheikh Nimr to perpetuate stereotypes of the Shi'a community at-large, promoting suspicions about Shi'a allegiances, and discrediting the King's attempts at greater openness. Despite the timing, Al-Nimr tried to de-link his statements from King Abdullah's efforts for interfaith dialogue, saying that his demands have nothing to do with the King's attempts at encouraging openness, and instead are demands that have been made by Saudi Shi'a for decades. A recurring comment by friends and foes of Sheikh al-Nimr is that he lacks the ability to place his actions within a greater vision for the community. Though most described him as a kind personality, all agreed that he is unsure of what he wants to accomplish

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with his aggressive rhetoric. While his words appeal to those tired of what they see as stagnancy in securing greater Shi'a rights, most analysts believe that al-Nimr has no greater plan for his words, and instead simply lets emotion and demagoguery get the best of him.

19. (S/NF) The fears of post's contacts regarding the backlash against al-Nimr's words have already been realized as websites such as Sabq and al-Sahat have used al-Nimr's comments to criticize both the Sheikh and his sect. On al-Bina forum (www.benaa.com) one commentator called this "a clear statement about the rejectionists' (Shi'a) allegiance to Iran," while another referred to it as "Shi'a terror." Many of these conservative sites also brought up the question of why al-Nimr has not been reined in by Saudi authorities, a question that is echoed by Qatif leaders. Given past imprisonments and the reaction to his January statements, the SAG follows Sheikh al-Nimr closely (Reftel B), making the lack of MOI action during July all the stranger. Conspiracy theorists offer that the MOI has not intervened because this radical Shi'a rhetoric plays into the hands of Interior Minister Prince Naif - and his Sudairi brothers - who they perceive as opposing the King's efforts at interfaith dialogue (Reftel C). Others believe that the SAG is hesitant to create social unrest by arresting Sheikh al-Nimr, while a third opinion argues that the SAG will react, but as with many things, on its own timeline.

110. (S/NF) Given the lack of tangible response to his January statements, the probability that these July statements will result in any immediate repercussions - outside of possible

MOI action against al-Nimr - is minimal. Shi'a unrest continues to bubble below the surface, and the deterioration of public safety in Qatif both serves as evidence of and fuel for increasing tensions. But, despite this unrest and the rabble-rousing of al-Nimr, the primary power centers in the Shi'a community still believe that continuing to work with the SAG - without demands followed by threats of violence - is the only feasible option for greater freedoms.

(APPROVED:JKINCANNON)
GFOELLER